

**Interview with Bertha Brenny and Emma Rodemann**  
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**Central Minnesota Historical Oral History Collection**  
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**Interviewed by Thomas Raiche**

Bertha Brenny, born 1906 and Emma Rodemann, born 1908 in Mayew Lake, Mn.

**Raiche:** Ok, we're talking here with Bertha Brenny and Emma Rodemann, they're both school teachers one is retired and one has one more year. And we'd like to talk to them about their experiences both in education and as a student or pupil. We'd like to start off with your first remembrance of school, you know, your first couple of years, grade school.

**Brenny:** I'm Bertha Brenny, I was born in 1906 and started school when I was eight years old at District 25, Benton County. When I started school all I could talk was German but I soon learned to talk the American language. We were only taught reading and arithmetic at first. As I remember our teacher, for seat work, would come around with a piece of chalk and write a number on our desk and a letter. And she wore a big black apron.

**Raiche:** Alright now, you said before when you started school you could only speak German was that a rare case or were there....

**Brenny:** There were most of our Mayew Lake people could talk only German and had to learn the English language after we started school. But after I learned to talk English my younger sister learned to talk English at home.

**Raiche:** Was German the only language you spoke at home?

**Brenny:** For a long time it was.

**Raiche:** Did they start now in the first grade, but in the first grade did they make it a project of the teacher to get you to learn English or did it just come in there and assume that you had it and just ignore the fact that most of you were....

**Brenny:** The way I remember it, we were just introduced to the ABC's and we studied the ABC's until we learned them. For busy work the teacher would write a couple of letters on the desk and he would give us a handful of corn and he would have to follow the lines of that corn until we had the whole letter outlined in corn. And then the next day we would do the same thing over and that's about the only kind of busy work I can remember.

**Raiche:** Well, didn't you have paper?

**Brenny:** No we didn't have paper. The teacher just wrote it on the desk an old wooden desk with a piece of chalk and that was it.

**Raiche:** Did each student get their own little piece of chalk to trace?

**Brenny:** No, the teacher wrote it with chalk, we didn't have chalk at all, all we had was the corn.

**Rodemann:** We had slates and a slate pencil that we could write on. We brought them from home and we very seldom used our own paper. We just didn't have any paper.

**Brenny:** Our buildings were framed buildings and they were heated by big stoves in the corner with wood, and the teacher made the fire and took out the ashes and things like that were her job. And then at our school in '25 we didn't even have a well. We had to go to the first home to get water for drinking. Many times we went without drinking water all day.

**Raiche:** What did you have for your lunches? Did you just sit right in your desk and eat?

**Brenny:** No, behind the stove in that school there was a metal frame around the stove so we could crowd around the frame to get warm. But behind that stove there were some shelves and one shelf was for the boys to put their lunch pails usually molasses pails or syrup pails and that's where the lunch was kept until it was time to eat.

**Rodemann:** Sometimes a youngster would have a father that smoked a pipe and they would even use those tobacco pails. He'd get his tobacco in a pail and they would use those after they were empty.

**Brenny:** Well, I remember that we always had butter and jelly sandwiches and fruit and cookies but a lot of kids weren't as lucky as we were, they had just bread with lard on it or just bread soaked in syrup.

**Raiche:** Yeah, you talked about you'd stay around this thing when you ate to stay warm. Wasn't the classroom warm at all?

**Brenny:** Oh, they were warm, but never so that you could be without it.

**Rodemann:** comfortably warm.

**Brenny:** And a lot of times when we just got to school in the morning the teacher had just started the fire and sometimes it was cold inside as it was outside because the stoves were provided with ventilators and the cold air would come in and the inside would be just like the outside.

**Rodemann:** And for bathrooms we had to go to little outside houses; we had no inside toilet.

**Raiche:** You didn't have running water or anything?

**Brenny:** No, as we said before we had to go about a quarter of a mile to get a pail of water, if anyone was brave enough to get a pail of water then we had a pail of water that day and if nobody went for water we just went without all day.

**Rodemann:** When I started school we walked to school and the neighbors and we had telephones and we called each other so that we would meet on the corner and the boys would watch out for us little girls along the way and we'd walk cross country. But one winter the first year I went to school we were lucky enough to get rides all winter long. And we got rides because I was so short and fat that they were afraid I wouldn't make it through the snow because we went in a big bob sled. Usually the bob sled was full of kids by the time we got to school, and when we took off from school it was full until we got to the different homes different ones got off. And we were pretty much on the farthest end from school. So it worked out pretty good for the neighbor's kids. And we also had one neighbor kid in the group that every once in a while would unhook the top part of the box so that everybody would fall out into the snow.

**Raiche:** Now looking back, you know, on your education would you say now what were your main subjects in the elementary grades?

**Brenny:** In the elementary grades all I remember is math and reading.

**Rodemann:** And spelling.

**Brenny:** And spelling. Once in a while we'd sing a little song but not very often. We did have one teacher that taught us a lot of fancy work. But when I was in fourth grade, I put in only about half the year in the elementary section and then I went into the upper grades because the teachers thought that I should be capable of doing this – I had started when I was older. When we got up into the fifth grade we were taught geography but we had no maps and it would be interesting if

we had kept some of these maps that we drew. We had these different continents. We were also taught grammar, which was very difficult for all of us.

**Rodemann:** We had a library, an old bookcase, with maybe 50 books in it, you had to be in college almost before you could understand and read it. I haven't any idea where they got these books they were much too difficult for grade school kids and of no interest at all. I can remember carrying books home because the teacher said we had to take library books, but I know I didn't open it after I got it out of school.

**Raiche:** Well—ow, you talked about new maps, was there anything at all like a text book?

**Brenny:** We had text books in math, we had text books in reading, we had text books in geography.

**Raiche:** You mean the text books all had maps in them so you could all follow along with...

**Brenny:** I don't remember any because I would just know that South America didn't look the way I drew it!

**Rodemann:** I can't remember ever having any encyclopedias or dictionaries when we went to grade school. That was brand new to us when we started St. Ben's. That's where I went to high school. Everything was quite new to us because we had lived in just the rural community and then being put with all these people we had many things to learn because we now had big libraries, and we had dictionaries, and we had encyclopedias that we had to learn to use.

**Raiche:** Was it really difficult to change from going to a country school?

**Rodemann:** It was just so stupid—you didn't know anything—what these things were for. I can remember the first yard stick I saw I thought, "My gosh, what's this big stick?"

**Brenny:** It really wasn't all that difficult for us, but we had to learn to use so many things that we didn't know how. As a pupil or student we didn't do that badly at school.

**Rodemann:** It was just something to see this big library and to learn to use an encyclopedia and a dictionary and I think it's the one thing I learned to use. I remember most in religion class we studied the bible one year. And they had an immense bible that we had to learn to use. There we had many textbooks and many things to work with.

**Raiche:** Do you remember when you started out at St. Ben's were the instructors of a lot better quality? You know, in your high school as compared to what you had in your....

**Rodemann:** There's no comparison with instructors that we had in grade school compared to the ones we had in high school. Because many of our people who had in the grade schools went to high schools one or two years and then went to St. Cloud State or St. Cloud Normal School, that's what it was called at the time, for 6 months.

**Brenny:** 6 weeks.

**Rodemann;** Six weeks and then they were given a teaching certificate, a second grade teaching certificate. And most of our teacher were only qualified that much.

**Raiche;** You mean you never even had to finish high school?

**Rodemann:** No.

**Brenny:** Some of them never even saw the inside of a high school. They went through the eighth grade and went to Normal School for 6 weeks and then they could go out in the country and teach if they could get a job, if somebody would hire them.

**Raiche:** Now at St. Ben's it was all sisters....

**Brenny:** They were all qualified teachers. No, I think the first year I went there I had all sisters but the second year we had a lady teacher for English.

**Raiche:** Do you remember science at all?

**Brenny:** We didn't have science in the grade school, but I took botany which is a plant study at St. Ben's, and physics and chemistry. I remember in botany we had Sister Ambro for a teacher and she would take us out in the woods and we'd study plants and different things out there. In physics it was rather difficult for me until I started teaching because I couldn't understand, we had too many pumps and things to work with.

**Rodemann;** Well I took chemistry from Sister Magma and she got a radio kit which was new to all of us and we assembled that kit. But it was one of these that you had to put the earphones on to hear. And when we had our work finished we could go and listen to this radio. Sometimes when there was a special speaker on we'd take turns and listen and take notes to help other people. And in chemistry we had a wonderful lab to work with—everything you could think of to work with.

**Raiche:** You mean that radio was the first radio any of you ever....

**Rodemann:** Yes that was the first radio I ever saw or any of the other pupils that were in the group too.

**Raiche:** Do you remember what year was that? Like what year did you graduate from school?

**Rodemann:** I graduated in 1924 and that was 1922 or '23.

**Raiche:** Do you remember what tuitions were back then at St. Ben's?

**Rodemann:** Oh, the first year I went alone my dad paid \$360. but it had to be paid within the first 30 days.

**Brenny:** But this was at St. Ben's, and St. Ben's was a boarding school for girls.

**Raiche:** Well, so the \$360. would cover room and board.

**Rodemann:** Just room and board and tuition, everything complete. The next year, both of us went there, and if you paid it within that specified time, you got a deduction of \$60. So we paid \$660. for the two of us for board, room and tuition.

**Raiche:** And that would last the nine months?

**Rodemann:** The nine months of the year and our books were included in that. But we had to sleep in a dormitory which was awful. We got up at six o'clock in the morning and went to mass, then came back about 7-7:30 and had breakfast and then we went on to classes.

**Brenny:** No, we went on to the assembly hall and classes started about eight o'clock in the morning. Our first class was about eight. We had ten minutes between classes and an hour off at noon. At 3:30 we had a lunch break and we got our mail and then we had study time until around six.

**Rodemann:** At our lunch break two people would go down to the kitchen and some sister would have a lunch tray fixed. Sometimes it was jelly sandwiches and raw carrots or different snacks.

**Raiche:** How big of a place was it?

**Brenny:** Well, mostly high school people, although they were starting the college at the time. I think they had oh, maybe 600 people.

**Rodemann:** There was at the time we attended there was only one building and that's the part the convent was included with it.

**Raiche:** You mean the dorm and the classrooms and everything was in one building?

**Rodemann:** Everything was in one building.

**Brenny:** Yeah, half of the building was a convent, half of the building was for school and the dormitories were on fourth and fifth floors and the classrooms on first and second. I don't know what was on third, there were classrooms on third too.

**Rodemann:** Some of the girls that came from wealthier families would have a private room but most of the pupils were in the dormitories.

**Raiche:** What do you mean, like two or three in a room?

**Rodemann:** Ten or twenty oh, in the room. In the private there was two.

**Brenny:** You mean the private rooms?

**Raiche:** No, I mean the average students.

**Brenny:** Dormitory? Oh, there were maybe twenty.

**Raiche:** Was it almost like a barrack type thing?

**Rodemann:** We had a bed and a little wash stand with a wash bowl and pitcher for water. And then we could draw curtains all around that little section if we wanted to, but most of the time only the outside curtains were drawn and in between your bed and the next bed wasn't drawn.

**Raiche:** Did they have like a shower room or a bathroom or a place where you had bathtubs?

**Brenny:** Oh yeah, we didn't have showers but there were bathrooms, but not in the dormitory, they had special rooms for bathrooms.

**Rodemann:** And on Saturday everyone had their certain little time that they went to take that bath and downstairs we had a little....

**Brenny:** You could take a bath on a Saturday but you had to get special permission to get a bath more often than on Saturdays. Then you had your particular time to take a bath.

**Raiche:** Now you graduated in '24 from St. Ben's then you went on to St. Cloud State? Now did they have a special thing for people who wanted to go into education, I mean a special program or was it just kind of a general education thing for everybody?

**Rodemann;** That's right, at the time I started it was more or less general. I can only remember one uilidng.

**Brenny:** That's all there was was that old brick building that isn't there anymore.

**Raiche:** What building?

**Brenny:** It stood in back of Stewart Hall.

**Raiche:** Did you live at the college too?

**Brenny:** No, we stayed with our aunt on the north side of town and walked most of the time from 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue North down to State, back and forth.

**Rodemann:** Five dollars a quarter.

**Raiche:** A quarter was like ten weeks we have now?

**Rodemann:** Yes.

**Raiche:** How long did you have to go there to get your teaching degree?

**Rodemann:** I went there, I didn't start in September, I started in summer school, I went the first summer school and then I stayed home until November and went the second quarter and the third quarter and went one summer school the next spring so that I had three quarters and I was given a limited first grade certificate.

**Brenny:** Summer school at the time was six weeks.

**Raiche:** Then did you start teaching right away with that one year?

**Rodemann:** That's right, with that first grade limited I started teaching at District 26 near New Ulm. I taught there on year.

**Raiche:** Did you teach just first grade?

**Rodemann:** Oh, I taught grades one through eight then. But I was lucky again then I didn't have all grades, I had some of the grades. I had textbooks, dictionaries and blackboards. I had a stove that I had to be there, your contract said fire had to be burning before 8 or by 8 o'clock so that the building would be warm by the time the children would come to school. And then I taught in District 27 and 37.

**Raiche:** Well now, what did first grade limited mean? I mean I thought it meant you could only teach first grade.

**Rodemann:** No, no you taught in a one room country school. If you were lucky you got into a two room school and you taught either lower grades or upper grades.

**Raiche:** Now as you said before, do you remember how many students there were when you first started? Well did you mean there weren't that many kids that you didn't have all the grades?

**Rodemann:** This wasn't a community that had very many at school that year and I just didn't have pupils in each grade.

**Brenny:** And it was more or less an ungraded room, you gave the kids what the kids could do.

**Raiche:** Well then, how did the kids advance?

**Brenny:** Well as soon as he could read say first grade material, well he moved on to the second grade material and so on.

**Raiche:** Was there an exam to get out of your grade schools and get into your high schools?

**Rodemann:** Oh yes, we had to take, they sent out tests and when you were in the eighth grade....

**Brenny:** And when you were in the seventh grade you could take geography and spelling and when you were in the eighth grade then you took the others.

**Rodemann:** And you had to pass, you had to take English, geography and history and spelling and math and you didn't have to pass them all, you had to pass four, didn't you?

**Brenny:** Four to get out and then the state would advance you or the county superintendent would advance you into the next grade.

**Raiche:** So students could advance along at whatever pace they were able to go until they were able to take the test?

**Rodemann:** That's right.

**Raiche:** So if you had someone who was really smart you could have someone up there in five years rather than eight?

**Rodemann:** I suppose. But most of the kids stayed in the grades one year and then they were automatically sent to second.

**Riache:** What did you do, did you divide them up that way? Like if you had eight classes did you have like maybe five first graders that you would maybe teach them their reading and their spelling or whatever and then you go to the three second graders and do it with them and up and up and up?

**Brenny:** Yes.

**Raiche:** You never mixed the grades for anything?

**Brenny:** Oh sure, if they could do it, if they were in their first year of school and they could read out of their second grade book....

**Raiche:** No, I mean how did you ever, I mean if you have eight classes you know, and even just a minimal of three subjects that's 24 classes a day. Or did you try to lean over on certain....

**Brenny:** No, you got your classes in every day, or you had parents on your neck.

**Raiche:** Well yes, but that's 24 classes a day?

**Rodemann:** Once in a while when I taught in district 31 when I was teaching phonetics especially if I had a fourth grader that didn't understand something and perhaps I was teaching the same thing in the third grade or something very much like it or something that they needed I'd say today we'll

work together. You could combine two groups that way. But they were still third graders, yes. And the first grade we didn't teach all of, we taught reading, math and a little bit of English.

**Brenny:** When we first started teaching, we always had the brighter child or the older child that would help the younger child. We might have a seventh grader and an eighth grader that were pretty smart or considered pretty smart help some little first grader or second grader do numbers or read or learn the alphabet and lots of times, if you had a bunch of kids who didn't know their addition facts or subtraction facts you take all of these kids and that was math then. Then you assigned them work according to their grade level.

**Raiche:** You got your first grade limited degree from State in what year?

**Rodemann;** 1925.

**Raiche:** How long did you finish? Did you ever take a four year....

**Rodemann:** I taught five years and then I didn't teach for 14 years until there was this teachers shortage and then I went back not because at that time I really wanted to but board members were coming here and asking me to come back, then when I went back to teaching I taught on a permit the first year, because my certificate had expired, but during the year I took off campus courses at Foley and earned eight credit hours which gave me the privilege of renewing my certificate. We were supervised by a superintendent who sent in into the board of Education with \$1.00 and our certificates were renewed, but those had to be renewed every five years in the meantime requirements were heavier and I started going back to state and I went to summer school and I graduated from a two year course in '55 and then I taught five years and was given the life certificate which I still hold.

**Raiche:** So actually all you ever went was the two years I mean it was just the two years degree you got....

**Rodemann:** Yes, and I've got a life certificate, she's got more education by a long shot.

**Raiche:** You were talking about your district 25 Benton County, now where could that be today and how big of a district and how did they chop that up?

**Rodemann;** You mean how did they start those districts?

**Raiche:** No, well where did they draw the boundaries and how did they determine what like you said first you started in school 25 was it? And then you went on....

**Brenny:** I think you're thinking of a township division.

**Rodemann:** To some extent it was, and also I think it was nationality division. See we were all German down there more or less, we went to school until the district, the outlying part was settled. Then I know that they put a part off and made a new district—66.

**Brenny:** There just a highway was a dividing line and if you lived on one side of the highway you went to 25 and if you lived on the other side of the highway you went to 66.

**Raiche:** Now like when you were taking about if somebody were I don't know what other nationalities would have been around here.

**Rodemann:** Polish.

**Raiche:** Ok, if you'd been Polish and lived by the German school you wouldn't go to the German school?

**Rodemann:** No.

**Raiche:** Not at all?

**Rodemann;** Not very easily.

**Brenny:** You just didn't find the people living that way. If the homes where the Polish people lived were centered in one spot why the German people lived in another spot.

**Raiche:** Oh, so it never happened where they might cross over.

**Rodemann:** Yes, it did happen. I know where a Polish family got into a group of Germans, how they got there I don't really know. But they didn't stay there, they bought a home and moved into the Polish settlement.

**Raiche:** Was there every any friction along those lines in the intergraded sense? Like along the Polish line and the German line?

**Brenny:** You mean did the people quarrel? They were just very polite to each other.

**Raiche:** But they didn't cross?

**Brenny:** No.

**Raiche:** They didn't do that.

**Brenny;** The social activities were....

**Raiche:** Bertha, you started school in '25 that's when you went to school now is that when you came back and started teaching?

**Brenny:** No, I taught in District 26t near New Ulm.

**Raiche:** In 25, now that's near Mayew Lake?

**Brenny:** That's where I went to school, but I didn't teach in 25.

**Raiche:** You didn't teach in 25.

**Brenny:** And then I taught in the district three miles from my home, not far from my house.

**Raiche:** Well, that's the one near here.

**Brenny:** That had all the textbooks the state required.

**Raiche:** Today is August 2<sup>nd</sup> and we're with Bertha Brenny again and we're going to continue with the interview we started July 23<sup>rd</sup> and what we've been discussing is Bertha's experiences as a student and as an instructor in the public school. Now we left off....

**Brenny:** When I started to teach. I started in 1925 and taught five years in county school and one year was out near New Ulm and two years out by Mayew Lake and two years in the area that I live today. At that time the enrollment was large, supplies were not very plentiful and we lived in the district. It was a requirement. You had to live in the district. I started out getting a way of \$80 a month, and I taught only eight months, and the fifth year I taught nine months. Then I didn't teach for fourteen years, because there were many teachers who had gotten married. And after the fourteen years there was quite a shortage of teachers so I hired out to District 31, Benton County. That later became District 98 when the districts were renumbered. In this school the enrollment was not very large because there were two schools. Then after the enrollment went on dropping in later years they closed the west school and brought all the pupils to my little building. The supplies

were fairly good here. We had all the required basic material and much of the supplementary work. But as the years went on, yes?

**Raiche:** Now, in the first five years that you were there what was it that you didn't have that you would have liked to have had? You know, like textbooks and things like that?

**Brenny:** We didn't have supplementary.

**Raiche:** What did you have? Did you have textbooks?

**Brenny:** We had textbooks and we had maps and dictionaries and blackboards and some library books.

**Raiche:** When you were going to school you said there was a shortage of paper. Now, did each one of these students have their own little notebook?

**Brenny:** They each had their own notebooks, they each had their own pencils and color crayons and they had tablets. They carried lunches to school, we had no hot lunches. Then the second school I taught in had a phonograph which we could use for some activities. Especially with folk dancing and singing and so on. And the third school I taught in had a very large enrollment. This had maps, dictionaries, and encyclopedias. The children each had their own paper, pencils, and some had slates and color crayons.

**Raiche:** Now where was the second school?

**Brenny:** South of Mayew Lake. It was then District 27, and I don't know what it was when it was renumbered.

**Raiche:** What was a large enrollment?

**Brenny:** I had 42 in all grades.

**Raiche:** That was for eight grades?

**Brenny:** For all eight grades. In District 37, that was the third school and that's here in Grand Township where I live. And that had an enrollment of about 37 in all eight grades. It had maps and globes and a little bit of drawing paper that the children could use for art activities. But no work books or any supplementary work. And no teachers manuals for the first five years. Then after I started the second time I went to a school three miles from my home. There I didn't have to live in the district. I could live at home and drive back and forth to school and I taught there 23 years. When we first started we only had 12 children in eight grades, but two grades were missing. So actually I only had six grades. And there I had maps, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and drawing paper. The children had their own pencils and color crayons and chalk and all the textbooks that we needed. All that were required. But as I worked in this district the board kept on adding, and we had textbooks, the basic textbooks, and we had all the supplementary texts that we needed. And we had a library book, encyclopedias, dictionaries, maps and a globe.

**Raiche:** Now what were the basic classes that you had?

**Brenny:** When I first taught it was math, grammar, reading, spelling, geography, and history. And then as we went into District 31, that's the second session I taught.

**Raiche:** This would be after the 14 year lay off?

**Brenny:** No, that was before. After the 14 year lap we had math, English, (which included spelling, reading, and language work) social science, which was geography and history, and we had science. Now when I started there I gave the equipment that we had, but as we went along the board gave

us all the necessary work books and things that accompanied the extra assignments that were taught. And we had a library. The library when I left there had about 900 books, many informational books. They weren't all just story books. And we had two sets of encyclopedias. A globe and a blackboard and maps that were up to date. And also when I taught in the first session in that you had to make your own fire, and you had just wood or coal to burn. But as I stayed in this school they changed it to oil heat and then that was controlled by itself. And after I was there about ten years they remodeled the school and put a little corner in the big long hall that all the country schools had. They cut off a corner and made that into a library corner and left room enough for a big refrigerator so that the children could join the milk program, and they got two pints of milk a day.

**Raiche:** What would be the year that you got on the milk program?

**Brenny:** Possible 1955. Let's see, I started in this school in 1944. Between 1955 and 1960. Then they would get two half pints of milk a day. We had the refrigerator in back. And in our county we had a film strip machine and a film strip library at the superintendent's office. And also records. So the district bought a film strip machine and a recorder so I could use both of those and we had many records to help us teach singing, and we also had a music teacher that would come in and help us teach singing, and at the end of the year our area would gather in Sauk Rapids for a big music festival where all the children would go and we'd practice together twice and then we'd go one evening and give this music festival to the parents or anyone who wanted to come and listen to it. Then they bought a recorder, I shared the recorder with another school, though. There were two of them. The last two years I was up there we also had an overhead projector and I had a telephone in my school.

**Raiche:** What year was that?

**Brenny:** The telephone? Probably the last ten years I taught there and that would be 1957, '58 when I got it.

**Raiche:** Then you were done in about 1968?

**Brenny:** 1967 was when I left this district to go teach in a parochial school.

**Raiche:** Now was that a county school too?

**Brenny:** it was a little town of Teaman-. I taught in the parochial school of Teaman for two years at the village. But all the area people from our parish attended that school and I taught fifth and sixth grade then.

**Raiche:** Just the two grades then?

**Brenny:** Yes, then I taught two years there and then that was closed. Then I went to Pierz and taught only fifth grade which is larger than Teaman. But in district 98 we had anything that would help the children with accompanying activities with their textbooks or supplementaries. They were very plentiful there. We also had a piano from about 1960 to 1966. Then we had to get rid of the piano because the enrollment got so large that we didn't have room for the piano. I'm not sure of the year though. Say about '66 or '67. They took the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade and put them in junior high and they didn't stay with us. I only had sixth grade. But the last two years there wasn't room for the sixth grade. So we had only five grades up there with an enrollment of 37. And the sixth grade was sent to Sauk Rapids which was the area school.

**Raiche:** Now was that school off the train?

**Brenny:** Up north Silver Corner.

**Raiche:** Yeah, right, I've been up there.

**Brenny:** Now we also had fun periods. Like Halloween we'd have a party and the children would do all the planning and we'd have our committees and the children planned so that they would learn socially too. At Valentines we had a big party. At Christmas we had a big party where all the parents would come and Santa would come and the little ones were brought which was a big community affair, and at the end of the school year there was a great big picnic. Everybody in the district was invited whether they had children in the school or not they were invited. We didn't always take part in their joys. If there was a death in the district the children were either allowed to go to the funeral or to sit home and babysit so the parents could go.

**Raiche:** Ok, now you started in 1925 and then you quit in 1930.

**Brenny:** Because I got married and married people couldn't get jobs at that time. You see, you lived in the district and they just didn't believe in having a married woman as a teacher. Though there were plenty of teachers, there was a surplus of teachers at that time.

**Raiche:** What was the reason that they didn't want....

**Brenny:** I don't want to tell that.

**Raiche:** Alright. So then it was 14 years again.

**Brenny:** It was 1944.

**Raiche:** What allowed for the shortage?

**Brenny:** It could have been....I really don't know. But there was a shortage of teachers and different board members came to visit me. Early in the morning, at noon, during the afternoon they kept on saying that they wanted to hire me. It was board members from different districts. And the board members from where I hired out came and said they were not going home until I signed the contract. And I signed the contract to get rid of them and went back to teaching.

**Raiche:** Now was there anybody after you in that in between period that 14 years, or did it just happen like in 1944 they all....

**Brenny:** Just in 1944, yes. They had to have teachers before that. I wasn't approached by anyone to come back.

**Raiche:** I was wondering, did you, you said you had social studies class and everything in '44. Did you bring the war, you know, and things like that into your classes?

**Brenny:** You mean any local news that was happening at the time? Yes. All current things. The wars I don't remember as much what was brought in as the moon flights. Where there was the first moon flight we had a radio there to listen to any broadcast that was given. We also looked at the different layers of the atmosphere and how much they measured. Then we looked at keeping this thing up in the sky, a little model space ship. But we followed that and when Mr. Kennedy was assassinated we didn't have the radio on, but having the telephone in the classroom we immediately knew before he died even that he'd been shot. And we did have a little weekly reader that we got with all the local news. I don't know if you're acquainted with the weekly reader that was used in Benton County by the majority of schools. And that brought all the current news that was going on at the time. And you could get it for the first through eighth grades.

**Raiche:** When did you start using that?

**Brenny:** The current events? Possibly around 1956—57. And the children would bring in clippings of anything that they wished to make for the bulletin board. Now, for our science, the first week of school usually all of us went on a field trip and we would tramp around in the woods and pastures around the school house and collect weeds and leaves and any insects we could find and stones and things. We'd come back to the school house in time so we could press our weeds and leaves and put them away so they wouldn't spoil for us and then we would classify them and things, and our rocks we'd classify and name. And then we did have a Benton County Fair that we could enter some of these things in and we would enter them. Collecting insects I think was the most interesting because many of our students would go home and start collecting. And pretty soon their little brothers and sisters would go during the daytime and collect insects for them. Then they would bring them in. they would find cocoons and bring them to school and we would bring them in and in the spring we would watch them hatch. We had cachucha, we had monarchs hatch, I don't remember if we had any others but it was quite interesting. About the time they were going to hatch some youngster would sit and watch and the minute they saw them start hatching they'd give that signal and we'd all watch which I think was quite interesting. We had many scrapbooks and charts along. Especially in Minnesota History, in that we collected so much news for that scrapbook. The sixth grade was taught Minnesota History and it would always make a scrapbook each year. Collecting current news, as much of it as they could. Then another thing, in the fifth grade we taught U.S. geography. And one of the first things was to make a map of the community, and I think making maps is good for the children because it teaches them. It must be accurate, it must have a scale, it can't be drawn as big as it actually is. You learn to know where people live and you learn to know that these people who make maps for books have quite a job.

**Raiche:** Now I've got a couple of questions. Now you were talking about the collections that you had, did you have a lot of, you know, in the science class were you, oh, I don't know, a lot of different....

**Brenny:** Equipment?

**Raiche:** Yes, things that were made available to you.

**Brenny:** Yes, we had also some in our own library in Foley at the County Court House which we could borrow for two weeks at a time. We had the filmstrips and it could be sent through the mail, though we didn't very often send it through the mail, there were a number of us and we would group together and somebody would take it. Then we also had one year teachers that just went from place to place to teach science. And on certain days he would come to your school and teach science and he had much equipment. But we had many models, we had a model of the sky in Foley that we could borrow during the time that we were teaching about the sky. They had all of the organs of the body, too. And there would sometimes be a big one and those that you could take apart.

**Raiche:** Yes. How many schools do you know that were in this? In other words, centered around this thing that you could check them out?

**Brenny:** All the county schools in Benton County and Foley and Sauk Rapids independent schools could. Because each one of us contributed money to this. The county school contributed \$15 a year, but the two independent schools contributed double. And then they could draw too. They had some of their own material but they could draw from this material too. And they had many charts that you could draw for science, for especially science, some for social studies.

**Raiche:** Did you ever find that there was a shortage? I mean like would you remember a number?  
As in a shortage? Like if you wanted it, could you get it?

**Brenny:** Filmstrips? Not very often that we couldn't get it. Because we had more than one filmstrip after they learned which were needed most and asked for most. Then we got two or three sets and we didn't have to wait very often. But you could plan your work and put your application in such and such a week I would like this film if there was a shortage. See, I worked on this board before that. Filmstrips library in Foley. Also on the music board.

**Raiche:** You got a special music teacher too that went....

**Brenny:** We had a special music teacher that went around and taught music. And then they did this to the parochial schools in Benton County. And we also had a county nurse that would come around in the fall of the year and we would bring the audiometer out and certain weeks we were all assigned the audiometer through that we had to use within that week. And we would check eyes and ears.

**Raiche:** You mean you did that yourself?

**Brenny:** I did that myself. We planned for the day by planning all written work for the children. I was lucky enough to have this little room where we could sit and do this. Then any child that I found had vision problems or hearing problems the nurse made a call at the school and she took and rechecked them and if they needed to see a doctor then she sent a form home advising them to take this child to the doctor to see what their problems were.

**Raiche:** Ok. Now you talked before about the current issue scrapbook.

**Brenny:** Yes.

**Raiche:** With your sixth grade?

**Brenny:** Yes.

**Raiche:** When did you start that, can you remember?

**Brenny:** I left, I went to college in 1955 that's when I graduated. I went there in '52, '53 and '55. And that's where I got many of these scrapbook ideas. Because I was required to and then I just carried it over from my school so I would say about 1955.

**Raiche:** Ok now, remember any of the current issues that the children would collect? Was there anything that really impressed them that you can recall? Like before you mentioned that they really got excited about the president's assassination and his getting shot and things like this. But like when you first started in 195....

**Brenny:** No, not at first they didn't get excited over it. But as it grew and the parents became interested, this was a very good district to teach in because the parents co-operated so well. The school board was an excellent board and I would say that in about 1950 perhaps a little bit earlier our school board had a work shop once a year just like the teachers do. Only the teachers had it two days and the school board had it only one. And they were made acquainted with all the requirements for a school. But I don't know about your city schools but in the county unless you met those requirements your state aid was cut. To get state aid you had to meet certain requirements. When I first taught in any county school, we only had one door to a building and about oh, I would say 1952 or '53 the state required that they put two doors in. Because in case of fire you would be trapped by one door. Then in about 1960 we were required to put in fire extinguishers. And we had to have fire drills just like your other schools. And we'd have our fire

drill to see how fast we could get out. We were very fortunate we never had to clear the building, we never had a fire.

**Raiche:** Well now, there is a point. You know the last time we recorded you talked about how a student could be at a different, he could work at his own speed. I mean he could work along with the group. But if he was slow in math he could be in second grade math and say, fourth grade reading.

**Brenny:** Yes.

**Raiche:** Now, it was more for the county schools like that. Now they just tried to bring the student up to the point where he could take his exams and get into high school.

**Brenny:** In the first five years when I taught in the county school you had to take what you call state boards and unless you passed four out of those five you couldn't graduate and go into high school. But in my first four years from '25 to '30 not many county people went to high school. Really we were one of the very few that went to high school. From Mayew Lake we were probably the only ones going to high school and then when I started in 1944 in district 31 there was I think only one family that sent their's to high school, maybe two. As we got further, you see there was a requirement that the child would go to school until he was 16. And they would be out of the eighth grade and just stay home. Then we would report this to the superintendent. Anybody could, the teacher could, the parents could if they wished, although nobody did, or the school board could. But it was always left up to the teacher, and we got them interested in high school in this district and everybody went to high school. There was no one who didn't. We didn't have any dropouts.

**Raiche:** In '25 through '30 did you have a lot of kids who would just maybe go just two or three years just to maybe get the reading and the writing and that was all they were....

**Brenny:** In that first '25 to '30 in the county school, the school term was 8 months. But I did teach in one school district, 27, where they had nine months. But the requirement was that a child attend school 40 days and then they could draw aid. And in 40 days you can't learn very much.

**Raiche:** Who can draw aid?

**Brenny:** The school district.

**Raiche:** So you mean if the kid....

**Brenny:** Between 1930 and 1944 this law was changed. You had to attend....

**Raiche:** Now here, wait! Now what I was after, after that first five year period the student I mean if the teacher wanted to do it or command it the students could go like 40 days which would be like 8 five week periods. Then they could shut it off after that. And they would still get their aid.

**Brenny:** No, you'd find very few people only sent their five weeks. The majority of them went the full year. Most of the parents sent....

**Raiche:** But it really wouldn't be to the parents' advantage. I mean to send them only 40 days it would be more to the teachers because....

**Brenny:** Oh, yes it was. They would keep these people home that were in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade and have them help them with work on the farm.

**Raiche:** Yes, I can see that, but what I was, the point of....

**Brenny:** It would be more of an advantage to the teacher by all means.

**Raiche:** Because she could have a very small class or no class at all and she'd be getting the aid because the children were there for 40 days.

**Brenny:** She'd get her wages just the same.

**Raiche:** For the entire 8 months if they'd only been there for 8 weeks.

**Brenny:** Yes. But it would only be 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders that would do this. And there were very few of those that you know. But there were some.

**Raiche:** Stayed at home for work?

**Brenny:** Yes. And sometimes we were happy that some of those stayed home. Because you see, by the time that they got in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and by going only 40 days many of them got to be 14, 15 years old. Even had one that was almost 17 years old. When I started up here in 37 I had....

**Raiche:** That's district 37?

**Brenny:** I had Ted Patrick from Patrick filing. He decided he was going to graduate from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and he was 16 when school started. And he came and he attended school every day until those state boards came. And he took them and that was the last day he was there. But he did pass. He did graduate, it was worth that to him and he has become quite successful in his business. Except that he's paralyzed now.

**Raiche:** Well, then you kind of you almost eliminated the idea of grades altogether?

**Brenny:** The children thought it was great they were in grades. Another thing that you could do, you could have one of the older ones help one of the younger ones or you take division for example when you teach long division to your fifth grade, if the first through fourth graders were through,

they could sit there and watch because when you presented it you used the blackboards and many times your fourth graders could work it almost quicker than the fifth grade because the pressure wasn't there. They learned it on their own. Also your phonetics. At the end of the first year a lady asked me, she said since when do you teach vowel sounds in the first grade? I said I didn't. She said, Oh yes, my daughter knows all the vowel sounds. And she had learned them by listening to the other grades. So there is an advantage there, they can listen from grade to grade. But the bad part was that the child who really need help didn't have that time. It was always the more intelligent child that would get this.

**Raiche:** What I was after before, you know you said they could go there 40 days, well now what did you do with the student who went to the first grade, second grade, third grade, just 40 days.

**Brenny:** The first, second, third and fourth grade I never found any of that just went 40 days, it was only in the seventh and eighth grades.

**Raiche:** Ok, let's say....

**Brenny:** Except in the spring sometimes you'd have parents send their children the last 40 days or 45 days of school with the idea that the child would get acquainted with school.

**Raiche:** Oh yes.

**Brenny:** And then you would teach them reading and a little math and that was it. And sometimes we were fortunate to teach a child to read quite well. Depending upon the child's ability.

**Raiche:** But didn't you find, you know you talked about one student who was 16 wouldn't that happen quite regularly, you would have a student who like in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade came back and only

went 40 days and came back in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and only went 40 days, then when they came for those exams didn't they have a great deal of trouble with those?

**Brenny:** They just didn't pass.

**Raiche:** And they just forgot about the idea of an 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation?

**Brenny:** That's right, they just didn't pass.

**Raiche:** Ok, now you retired from teaching in 1971. The other day I was out there we talked about how the county school is, in fact it's gone. What happened?

**Brenny:** They were consolidated with their closest high school area which in Benton County is Sauk Rapids, Foley and I believe a few go to Milaca. And they're completely closed and they're all bused into these bigger schools. Sauk Rapids had an elementary school in Rice. So the people who live around Rice are quite fortunate in having their youngsters for the first six grades be used into Rice which is much shorter.

**Raiche:** In your opinion, was it a mistake?

**Brenny:** In my opinion, yes I think that as I taught in a grade school I find that we lose something by putting them into these schools. And that thing is love for your fellow man. Because in a little county school the first and the eighth grader could communicate quite well. And many of your 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade people would help take care of the littler ones. When I went into the grade school the last two years especially the last year I had a number of people who wouldn't even play with the others they just played in their own little group because they kept on telling one another they were not their friends, so I feel that love for our fellowman and consideration for them is lost.

This concludes this interview